

St. Andrew's United Church (Williams Lake)
March 14, 2021 – Lent 4 Year B
(Zoom, email, regular mail)

ORDER OF SERVICE

Welcome & Land Acknowledgement

Welcome to the gathering of the family of Jesus. We gather on lands walked for thousands of years by people of the First Nations. We acknowledge the history, culture, and spirituality of the Secwépemc (Shuswap) People. We also honour the heritage and gifts of the Métis people. We remember our responsibility as persons who inhabit this land alongside our First Nations and Métis sisters and brothers. May we live the respect that our words offer.

In the name of Jesus, who is alive in each of us, peace to you.
And also with you.

*Invitation to take and release three slow, deep breaths
and allow the space you're in to become worship space for this time*

Written by Susan Lukey. Adapted by Nancy Colton.
Gathering, Lent/Easter 2021, page 29.
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to ground and center ourselves for worship

Hymn – Come Touch Our Hearts

MV 12

Call to Worship

One: We are given life –

All: by Love.

One: We are called –

All: by Love.

One: We are gathered together –

All: by Love.

One: By God's love for us...

All: and by our love for God.

One: So, this day and all days...

**All: we abide in the love of God,
living God's will,**

loving God's way.

One: Come, people of God's covenant love,
let us worship God.

Written by Richard Bott.

Gathering, Lent/Easter 2018, page 30.
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Opening Prayer

One: Let us pray:

**All: You, God, are our all-in-all,
the ground of our being,
the rock of our faith,
the place of shelter,
in the never-ending dance
of our lives.**

**For those moments in which
we need calm,
give us peace.**

**For those moments in which
we need to GO,
give us the energy.**

**For those moments in which
we need simply to be,
give us love.**

**And help us to be
your conduits of love, energy, and peace
that flows into the world**

(20-30 seconds of quiet time)

One: In Christ's name, we ask it.
Amen.

Written by Richard Bott.

Gathering, Lent/Easter 2018, page 30.
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Hymn – *Love is the Touch*

MV 89

Prayer of Confession

Ever-Abundant God, we open our hearts to you this day,
and offer these truths:

Today we live in the fear that encompasses us.
Today we live with the prejudice that is right in front of us.
Today we live with the ignorance that dwells within us.
Today we live with the doubt that holds us back.
Help us, we pray,
that we will find courage in unlikely places,
discover the world with new and gracious understandings,
move to those places where love is needed.
and have faith that you are with us.
This we pray in Jesus' name.
Amen.

Written by Julie Hutton.
Gathering, Lent/Easter 2021, page 35.
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Assurance of Pardon

Friends, hear the good news that God listens to our prayers,
understands our concerns,
and holds us close in this time of confession and truth-telling.
Know today that we have been given the grace and the courage
to go into the world and spread this good news.
May it be so.

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Scripture Readings

Numbers 21:4-9 A bronze serpent heals the people

4 From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. ⁵The people spoke against God and against Moses, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.' ⁶Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷The people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸And the LORD said to Moses, 'Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.' ⁹So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

John 3:14-21 For God so loved the world

*The text as told by Linnea Good in the video –
as a script reflecting the emphasis of the telling*

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,
so must the Human One be lifted up,
that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him may not perish
but may have eternal life.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world,
but in order that the world might be saved through him.
Those who believe in him are not condemned;
but those who do not believe are condemned already,
because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

And this is the judgment,
that the light has come into the world,
and people loved darkness rather than light
because their deeds were evil.

For all who do evil hate the light
and do not come to the light,
so that their deeds may not be exposed.

But those who do what is true
come to the light,
so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

Sermon – Snakes! Yikes!

What’s your feeling about snakes? What’s your feeling about poisonous snakes?

My family and I lived in the manse in Oxford Mills the last time I remember meeting a snake in the wild, so to speak, and in person. Kiera was maybe 11 or 12 it was probably our second summer in Ontario, maybe the third. That summer Victoria, Kiera’s best friend from

Shearwater, was in the middle of moving to Ottawa, about an hour, hour and quarter, from Oxford Mills. While her parents were doing the heavy lifting, Victoria's grandmother had the most important job of all – keeping Victoria out of the way and entertained. Easy peasy, Victoria's grandmother thought, we'll go visit Kiera's family. The girls were ecstatic to be reunited, Keane was more than happy to have his spare sister to pester, and the adults had a lovely visit. We even took the dogs for a walk around the village.

None of that was earth shattering or particularly exciting – but what happened next sure was.

The girls and Keane were ahead with the dogs, already on the front porch, Victoria's grandmother was about halfway up the front walk, I was behind her. Suddenly, she screeched and jumped up about 3 feet and back a good 5 feet! The garter snake that had come out of nowhere to slither across the sidewalk just in front of Victoria's grandmother was probably scared half to death. The kids never did find it.

There's a crazy story about snakes in the Bible. Not the one in the garden, these snakes are out in the desert. It's part of the story of the Hebrews being led out of Egypt by Moses and cared for by God in the wilderness.

As the story goes, having been freed from Egypt and now out in the desert, the Hebrews complained repeatedly about things including the food and water God had provided for them. I'm sure they were hot and tired, definitely they were impatient and unhappy, and just as definitely they complained about the food they had. So, God sends them poisonous snakes. Not to eat. The snakes bit and kill many people, so the other people go to Moses saying they've sinned and ask him to ask God to save them. Off Moses goes to God, and God tells Moses to a bronze snake on a pole and hold it up. When they're bitten, the people who look at the snake will be healed. And they are.

On the surface, it might seem like this is a pretty straightforward “punishment for complaining followed by a demonstration of God's power” kind of story. After all, they've complained a lot since leaving Egypt and perhaps God is tired of their obvious lack of gratitude.

Or ... perhaps God understands that the complaining isn't dissatisfaction and a lack of gratitude, it's fear. It didn't take the Hebrews long to move from celebrating their freedom to being afraid of the unknown. As awful as things were in Egypt, at least it was predictable, familiar. Out in the desert everything was completely unknown to them, new and frightening, probably terrifying. Decidedly unknown. They question Moses – and God – from the very beginning. They seemed to let their fear overwhelm their faith in God's presence, despite the constant and convincing evidence to the contrary.

A symbol: a snake on a pole, a serpent on a rod – the Rod of Asclepius – a symbol of healing even in 2021.

Back in the story... the snake on the pole is a symbol, a sign of God's presence. See it and believe and be healed God said to Moses with instructions to repeat that statement to the Hebrews in the desert. See it and believe and together we'll overcome this. The snakes don't go away, they don't stop biting, and they're still poisonous, but the Hebrews' fear of the snakes is met with a sign of God's presence and their healing can begin. The very object of their fear – the snakes – becomes a sign so that all could see it choose healing over fear. God gives them a way of looking at their fear and getting over that paralysis. God gives them an opportunity for perspective.

It was never really about the snakes; it was about the fear. About their hurting and grieving and feeling broken.

It's a covenant story.

There will be hard work and many challenges and it may be a really, really long journey, but healing can begin with this covenant with God: "I am with you, here's a sign to show you, have faith that you are loved and not alone. Take the next step and build the next moment.

We have faith; God has presence. God promises – covenants – to be present to God's people. To us. No matter what. All the time. In the face of all the unknowns and unknowables we can imagine and even the ones we can't imagine; in the face of an uncertain future, in the middle of a world-wide pandemic.

With God take the next step and build the next moment.

Later, the writer of John's gospel will tell how Jesus referenced this story as a way of understanding the cross. Just like Moses raised up the snake on a pole in the wilderness, he'll say, I will be on the cross, so that those who believe will have life.

And that's just the thing about holding up a sign: it's a sign of something greater. It's not to be held up and worshipped itself, but as a way of connecting to that greater thing. That, however we know God, we are loved by God, and we are not alone because God – and all God is – is with us.

There are a lot of poisonous snakes. We may find much to fear, there may be many ways in which we feel broken, hurting, grieving, many feelings that might hold us back. They're not going to go away, but we can face them, acknowledge them, and find a way forward.

Fear is the opposite of love. We can choose love and love will see us through our fear. God's covenant is love. God is love.

We are loved, we are love, and we can share that love.

Please join me in a short prayer:

Dear God, may we recognize and appreciate your presence in our lives. May we see you in our moments of hurt and grief and fear; in our moments of shyness, when we most feel alone may we know that you are present with us. May your spirit inspire us every step of our journey. Amen.

Hymn – *Draw the Circle Wide*

MV 145

Community Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

We give thanks for the gifts we receive, including the financial gifts we receive.
For the love of the world,
Jesus offered everything he had, even life itself.
In response to this powerful gift of love,
we offer our gifts and our lives to God
as we share our offering...

Written by Frances Flook. Adapted by Nancy Colton.
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... asking that God, our Loving Provider,
bless and grow these gifts to God's will and purposes.

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*p. 81 Crosswalks: prayers from a City Church,
“between darkness and light” David R. Allan.*

And now, O God, we are one in prayer but bring our own thanks and concerns. If some need to say “help me”, or “save me”, or “hold me”, or “forgive me”, then let these be spoken now in the confidence of our hearts in a moment of quiet prayer.

God in Community, Holy in One,
hear us as we pray as we have been taught,

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil:
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory
forever and ever. **Amen.**

Minute for Mission

"We Will Not Give Up On Them": M4M 2021 Mar. 14: Through Mission & Service, your gifts help Wesley Urban Ministries and other community ministries respond to growing...

<https://united-church.ca/stories/we-will-not-give-them>

The Life and Work of our Congregation

Hymn – *Love Divine, All Love's Excelling*

VU 333

Commissioning & Benediction

"The world is too dangerous for anything but truth and too small for anything but love."
(William Sloan Coffin)

"Life is short. We don't have much time to gladden the hearts of those who walk [the Way] with us. So, be swift to love and make haste to be kind." (Henri-Frédéric Amiel)

During the season of Lent, we are called to ponder:
ponder our call to a life of love,
ponder our call to follow self-giving in Jesus,
ponder who we are and whose we are in faith,
and ponder how we need to turn back to God –
first in confession and then in repentance.

Only then can we fully embrace
God's unconditional forgiveness.
During the season of Lent, we are called to ponder.

Let us go from this place,
continuing to ponder what it means to live
as a disciple of Jesus
and continuing to live the Way of Jesus each day.
Amen.

Written by Gord Dunbar.
Gathering, Lent/Easter 2018, page 34.
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